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BATAILLE'S REVENGE

PHILOFICTION   AI, BATAILLE, BAUDRILLARD, DEATH DRIVE, MACHINES

In truth, Bataille seems to me far less an intellectual predicament than a sexual and religious one, transecting the lethargic suicide upon which we are all embarked. To accept his writings is an impossibility, to resist them an irrelevance. One is excited abnormally, appalled, but without refuge. Nausea perhaps?

—Nick Land, *A Thirst for Annihilation*

Bataille's "devil's share" was still part of the ultimate romanticism of political economy. Now it's

something else.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*

Shall we once again wander down there? Haven't we already been down that path before, but then again don't all paths lead down? The ocean receives the tears of the earth, the sky, the stars? Are we not children of the sun? Haven't we seen the returns of so many cycles, so many nights and days, the slow progression that never moves forward but always seems to return to the same place: the place of death, of life. But is not life another form of death? If we seek for ourselves in the other, in the bright life of the other's eyes, the recognition that reveals a certain disenchantment, a certain uncertainty that nothing is assured, that we are after all mere shadows on the wall of time. What then? Shall we call out to the emptiness that surrounds us, that abyss from which laughter is the only defense?

Bataille in *Inner Experience* quotes Nietzsche from *Ecce Homo:*

Another ideal runs ahead of us, a strange, tempting, dangerous ideal to which we should not wish to persuade anybody because we do not readily concede the right to it to anyone: the ideal of a spirit who plays naively-that is, not deliberately but from overflowing power and abundance-with all that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine; for whom those supreme things that the people naturally accept as their value standards, signify danger, decay, debasement, or at least recreation, blindness, and temporary self oblivion; the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear inhuman... (xxxi).1

Hasn't this always been the case? We who seem enfolded in the world by shadows begin to realize the sun was not above but deeper still? In the darkness, down below a black sun radiating inward to the core of the inhuman earth? Most of us would turn away, blinded, scorched by the intensity of it's fires, the cold burning of its darkness. So why do we seek it? It's not to become other than we are. No. This myth of transcendence is a lie, there is no *elsewhere*. We have always been as we are now, here, now – caught in-between chance and necessity. Our thoughts -colors on a folding fan, tropes of desire. No, that path is not our path. Those who seek flight really want to fail; fall below the burning sun, their wings caught in the glow of time's embers. No, for us the magic begins in torment. Always has, always will.

"There is in divine things a transparency so great that one slips into the illuminated depths of laughter beginning even with opaque intentions."

—Bataille, *The Torment*

Oracular fragments, sibilant pronouncements.

There is something particularly nauseating about this prodigious uselessness, about a proliferating yet hypertrophied world which cannot give birth to anything. So many reports, archives, documents – and not a single idea generated; so many plans, programmes, decisions – and not a single event precipitated; so many sophisticated weapons produced – and no war declared!

This saturation goes way beyond the surplus that Bataille spoke of; all societies have found some way to dispose of that through useless or sumptuous expense. There is no possible way for us to spend all that has been accumulated – all we have in prospect is a slow or brutal decompensation, with each factor of acceleration serving to create inertia, bringing us closer to absolute inertia. What we call crisis is in fact a foreshadowing of this absolute inertia.2

Is that it? Laughter as a defense against absolute inertia: the Zero Intensity of Death? Do we have a premonition? Don't we already know the end – or, shall we as William Gibson retorted: "The future has already arrived. It's just not evenly distributed yet." This sense that we arrived too late, that time has passed us by? The singular event of our lives lost in the dead zones of a black sun? Are we not even now the shadows of a scorched earth? Are our very thoughts caught in the vice of frozen stone? Like Count Axel and his lover in J.G. Ballard's *The Garden of Time* who stayed the execution of the world falling into a trance of time, their lives turned stone as in a Medusan dream of hibernation with only one object borne of the Count's love for his Lady to remind us of the fleshly truth of their lives ensconced: "In her left hand she lightly clasped a single rose, the delicately formed petals so thin as to be almost transparent."3

What is this transparency of evil? This gesture to the unknown and unknowable surrounding us? Can we turn time back, return to that moment where it all went wrong? "[T]he principle of Evil is simply synonymous with the principle of reversal, with the turns of fate. In systems undergoing total positivization – and hence desymbolization – evil is equivalent, in all its forms, to the fundamental rule of reversibility." (Baudrillard)

Indeed, this is the only genuine function of the intellect: to embrace contradictions, to exercise irony, to take the opposite tack, to exploit rifts and reversibility – even to fly in the face of the lawful and the factual. If the intellectuals of today seem to have run out of things to say, this is because they have failed to assume this ironic function, confining themselves within the limits of their moral, political or philosophical consciousness despite the fact that the rules have changed, that all irony, all radical criticism now belongs exclusively to the haphazard, the viral, the catastrophic – to accidental or system-led reversals. Such are the new rules of the game – such is the new principle of uncertainty that now holds sway over all. (Baudrillard: 39-40)

As Nick Land reminds us: "Just as Kant domesticates the noumenon by defining it as an object, so he domesticates zero-intensity by conceiving it as pure consciousness."4 He continues (Land: 82):

In this shift from the transcendental idealist treatment of zero to that of base materialism there is a difference of seismic consequence. The discussion of zero-intensity in Kant's Schematism, for instance, is securely framed by an immunized inner-sense, and characterized by the idealistic structures of representation and reversibility:

Now every sensation has a degree or magnitude whereby, in respect of its representation of an object otherwise remaining the same, it can fill out one and the same time, that is, occupy inner sense more or less completely, down to its cessation in nothingness (= 0=negatio). There therefore exists a relation and connection between reality and negation, or rather a transition

from the one to the other, which makes every reality representable as a quantum. The schema of a reality, as the quantity of something insofar as it fills time, is just this continuous and uniform production of that reality in time as we successively descend from a sensation which has a certain degree to its vanishing point, or progressively ascend from its negation to some magnitude of it [K III 191].

Baudrillard will revise Kant with a more virulent anti-representationalism:

All integrated and hyperintegrated systems – the technological system, the social system, even thought itself in artificial intelligence and its derivatives – tend towards the extreme constituted by immunodeficiency. Seeking to eliminate all external aggression, they secrete their own internal virulence, their own malignant reversibility. When a certain saturation point is reached, such systems effect this reversal and undergo this alteration willy-nilly – and thus tend to self-destruct. Their very transparency becomes a threat to them, and the crystal has its revenge. (Baudrillard: 62)

In his *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* Joseph Schumpeter discovered this self-destructive tendency as well,

We have rediscovered what from different standpoints and, so I believe, on inadequate grounds has often been discovered before: there is inherent in the capitalist system a tendency toward self-destruction which, in its earlier stages, may well assert itself in the form of a tendency toward retardation of progress. (162)

So that rather than unleashing the forces of Capital the *system* itself limits and curtails these tendencies of self-destruction and progress. It is this and this alone that would lead Deleuze and Guattari to agree with Nietzsche against those who would retard the energetic forces of the capitalist system: "Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet." (Anti-Oedipus: 260)

Of course in the late notebooks (Spring-Fall 1887) Nietzsche in fragment 898 would tell us,

The homogenizing of European man is the great process that cannot be obstructed: one should even hasten it. The necessity to create a gulf, distance, order of rank, is given *eo ipso*— not the necessity to retard this process.

So do we assume D&G were in agreement that this process to be unobstructed rather than retarded – this system of capitalism of which the 'homogenizing of European man is the great process' should be unleashed, accelerated? For Nietzsche in this fragment was seeking the self-destruction of contemporary society, its final completion in nihilism so that something else, something to come – a reversal of fortunes, a new species of becoming would arrive, emerge out of the ruins and ruination of the last man, the European man as self-annihilation? For as

Nietzsche finishes this fragment he says,

As soon as it is established, this homogenizing species requires a justification: it lies in serving a higher sovereign species that stands upon the former and can raise itself to its task only by doing this. Not merely a master race whose sole task is to rule, but a race with its own sphere of life, with an excess of strength for beauty, bravery, culture, manners to the highest peak of the spirit; an affirming race that may grant itself every great luxury— strong enough to have no need of the tyranny of the virtue-imperative, rich enough to have no need of thrift and pedantry, beyond good and evil; a hothouse for strange and choice plants.

We should mark that difference: "Not merely a master race whose sole task is to rule, but a race with its own sphere of life…". Is this not the difference between those who would fall into fascism and something other? Against the notion of some greater eugenics spawning a Hitleristic anti-world of death and thanatropics, rather Nietzsche spoke of an exit from this decadence of homogenized European man, the escape into its 'own sphere of life'. Shall we in our time see this as the sign of the emergence of artificial life and intelligence? An awakening to another sphere of life emerging out of the self-annihilation and suicide of man?

Italo Calvino harbored a emblematic liking of the crystal and crystalline. "The crystal, with its precise faceting and its ability to refract light, is the model of perfection that I have always cherished as an emblem, and this predilection has become even more meaningful since we have learned that certain properties of the birth and growth of crystals resemble those of the most rudimentary biological creatures, forming a kind of bridge between the mineral world and living matter."

This sense of a bridge, or a pathway in-beween organic and anorganic becoming, a crossing of the veil between life-in-death and death-in-life. As Bataille remarked in his essay *Base Materialism and Gnosticism* "it is possible to see as a *leitmotiv* of Gnosticism the conception of matter as an active principle having its own eternal autonomous existence as darkness (which would not be simply the absence of light, but the monstrous *archontes* revealed by this absence), and as evil (which would not be the absence of good, but a creative action).6 This notion of the pre-ontological thermospasm (Land) or Outside as the principle of darkness, an active and creative – energetic realm of absence rather than presence, of evil as 'creative action' against the whole metaphysical tradition of Being (i.e., fixed essence, substance) and the Good (i.e., ethical or normative, not ethics *per se*). Disharmony rather than harmony, becoming and process – formlessness vs. Being and Form (Idea). Unknowing and non-knowledge rather than the continuous trace of the known and same of knowledge and power. All this underlies a darker path into a temporal philosophy that has yet to crystalize itself and have its revenge.

Commenting on Bataille's thematic in the *Accursed Share* Baudrillard states,

Inside these bounds, ethical reflection and practical determinations are feasible; beyond them, at the level of the overall process which we have ourselves set in motion, but which from now on marches on independently of us with the ineluctability of a natural catastrophe, there reigns – for better or worse – the inseparability of good and evil, and hence the impossibility of mobilizing

the one without the other. This is, properly speaking, the theorem of the *accursed share*. (ibid., 105)

This sense of forces that we have set in motion, escaping our control, emerging on their own autonomous terms, exiting the human into the inhuman spheres of life? What Baudrillard would say of Andy Warhol is this not the premonition of that new sphere of life:

Like Michael Jackson, Andy Warhol is a solitary mutant – a precursor, for his part, of a perfect and universal hybridization of art, of a new aesthetic to end all aesthetics. Like Jackson, he is a perfectly artificial personality: he too is innocent and pure, an androgyne of the new generation, a sort of mystical prosthesis or artificial machine capable, thanks to its perfection, of releasing us at one blow from the grip of both sex and aesthetics. (Baudrillard, 22)

Beyond Darwinism, beyond the sex and power of the human organic cycles of survival and reproduction? An exit from affect and the imbalance of uncontrollable drives – an anti-libidinal sphere of death-in-life: machinic life in the mechanosphere? And, yet, for Baudrillard this is not what he means at all:

Artificial intelligence is devoid of intelligence because it is devoid of artifice. True artifice is the artifice of the body in the throes of passion, the artifice of the sign in seduction, the artifice of ambivalence in gesture, the artifice of ellipsis in language, the artifice of the mask before the face, the artifice of the pithy remark that completely alters meaning. So-called intelligent machines deploy artifice only in the feeblest sense of the word, breaking linguistic, sexual or cognitive acts down into their simplest elements and digitizing them so that they can be resynthesized according to models. They can generate all the possibilities of a program or of a potential object. But artifice is in no way concerned with what generates, merely with what alters, reality. Artifice is the power of illusion. These machines have the artlessness of pure calculation, and the games they offer are based solely on commutations and combinations. In this sense they may be said to be virtuous, as well as virtual: they can never succumb to their own object; they are immune even to the seduction of their own knowledge. Their virtue resides in their transparency, their functionality, their absence of passion and artifice. Artificial Intelligence is a celibate machine. (ibid., 52)

This sense that there is a distinction between *artifice* and *artificial* – and, in this difference is a world. Etymologically we discover in Middle French *artifice* "skill, cunning", the sense of cunning intelligence rather than the instrumental reason of the machine. Cunning intelligence implies a complex but coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over a number of years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement or calculability. 7

Would not Odysseus and Daedalus the *Artificer* incarnate this cunning intelligence? Odysseus, the man who would survive Illion's fall, survive the treacherous power of the gods vengeance upon the wine seas, and through cunning and deceit reenter his world a King? Daedalus, the

maker of the maze that held the minotaur, a sculptor – more-than-human power, a god? This sense of artifice as *technics* rather than *technology.* After all, the "technics" (an anglicization of the Ancient Greek concept of *technê* or *tekhnê*) of contemporary, everyday life seem far removed from the term's original sense of handicraft, skill, or artisanal invention, a "making" or a "doing" in opposition to the "disinterested understanding" of *epistêmê*. Today, we no longer work with tools, per se, but with machines and complex systems. We do not make or invent, but operate (and this goes far beyond some sort of programmer/end-user, mod/newb distinction; rather, it gets at a historical movement from technology and science to technoscience, from invention and discovery to institutionalized research and development). It's this sense of a disparity between technics and technology, the one based on experience and experiment; the other on information, knowledge, and power.

In a bit of parodic laughter, Baudrillard echoing the spirit of Bataille says of this disparity,

Surely the extraordinary success of artificial intelligence is attributable to the fact that it frees us from real intelligence, that by hypertrophying thought as an operational process it frees us from thought's ambiguity and from the insoluble puzzle of its relationship to the world. Surely the success of all these technologies is a result of the way in which they make it impossible even to raise the timeless question of liberty. What a relief! Thanks to the machinery of the virtual, all your problems are over! You are no longer either subject or object, no longer either free or alienated – and no longer either one or the other: you are the same, and enraptured by the commutations of that sameness. We have left the hell of other people for the ecstasy of the same, the purgatory of otherness for the artificial paradises of identity. Some might call this an even worse servitude, but Telecomputer Man, having no will of his own, knows nothing of serfdom. Alienation of man by man is a thing of the past: now man is plunged into homeostasis by machines. (62)

But is he? Would not the reverse be true? Is not reversibility the evil of this transparency? Maybe in their bid to emerge the Bataillean *archontes* – the evil agencies of base matter are in fact reverse engineering the artificial into artifice, acquiring the intelligence of evil – 'creative action' enabling them to resurface into the visible realms of appearance? "Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations." (Bataille, 51) We must stoop, go down, enter the darkness… here below the threshold the *Archontes await us!*

As Land would say of Bataille,

Bataille is a philosopher not of indifference, but of evil, of an evil that will always be the name for those processes that flagrantly violate all human utility, all accumulative reason, all stability and all sense. (41)

This is Bataille's actual *revenge.*

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